

Proto-Indo-European ‘Horse’ From a Nostratic Perspective

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One of the benefits that should be gained through the Nostratic hypothesis is the ability to offer insights into various aspects of the Nostratic daughter languages that are not possible or not obvious from the internal evidence of the individual daughter languages alone. In this brief paper, I would like to explore one such insight.

The Proto-Indo-European word for ‘horse’ is traditionally reconstructed as **ek̑uo-s*. It is abundantly attested in the various Indo-European daughter languages: Sanskrit *áśva-h* ‘horse’; Avestan *aspa-* ‘horse’; Old Persian *asa-*, (Median) *aspa-* ‘horse’; Mycenaean *i-ko* (*hiqq̑o-*) ‘horse’; Greek ἵππος ‘horse’; Latin *equus* ‘horse’; Venetic (acc. sg.) *ekvon* ‘horse’; Old Irish *ech* ‘horse’; Gothic **aiha-* ‘horse’ in **aihvatundi* ‘bramble, prickly bush’ (literally, ‘horse-thorn’); Old Icelandic *jór* (< **exwar* < **exwaz*) ‘stallion, steed’; Old English *eoh* ‘horse’; Old Saxon *ehu-* ‘horse’ in *ehu-skalk* ‘horse-servant’; Lithuanian *ašvā* (Old Lithuanian *ešva*) ‘mare’; Tocharian A *yuk*, B *yakwe* ‘horse’, B *yākwaške* ‘little horse’; Hieroglyphic Luwian *á-sù-wa-* ‘horse’; Lycian *esbe-* ‘horse’.

Hittite, however, has **ekku-* ‘horse’, typically rendered in Sumerograms as (nom. sg.) ANŠE.KUR.RA-uš. As pointed out by Kloekhorst (2008:237—239), the Hittite form points to an earlier *u*-stem noun in Proto-Indo-European **ek̑-u-s*. This must have been the original form, and the forms found in the remaining daughter languages must have been derived from this form through the addition of the thematic vowel *-o-*, thus: **ek̑-u- + -o- > *ek̑-u-o-*.

Though attempts have been made to compare the Proto-Indo-European word for ‘horse’, **ek̑-u-s*, **ek̑uo-s*, with the Proto-Indo-European word for ‘quick, swift’, **ōk̑-u-s* (as seen, for example, in Sanskrit *āśú-h* ‘quick, swift’; Greek ὠκύς ‘quick, swift, fleet’; etc.), the lengthened-grade vowel in the latter form is problematic. Adding laryngeals to the reconstruction only adds to the difficulties (**ōk̑-u-s* ‘quick, swift’ < **HoHk̑-u-s*), for it is impossible to tell on the basis of the evidence from the daughter languages which laryngeals are involved. The initial laryngeal in the word for ‘horse’, however, can only have been **H₁*, which is often interpreted as a glottal stop /ʔ/ (so, for example, Kloekhorst 2008:237—239, who reconstructs Proto-Anatolian **ʔek̑u-* ‘horse’). The problems involved notwithstanding, the comparison of the word for ‘quick, swift’ with the word for ‘horse’ has led to the assumption that the word for ‘horse’ originally meant something like ‘the swift one’. However, another possibility presents itself when other Nostratic languages are brought into consideration.

Let us now look at Altaic, especially the Mongolian branch. Starostin—Dybo—Mudrak (2003:499) reconstruct Proto-Altaic **ək̑‘á* ‘to paw, to hit with hooves’ on the basis of the following forms:

- a) Proto-Tungus **ekte-* ‘to paw, to hit with hooves (horse); to rough-house; to faint’ > Manchu *ekte-* ‘to paw, to hit with hooves (horse); to rough-house’; Udihe *ektine-* ‘to faint’.
- b) Proto-Mongolian **(h)agsa-* ‘to have fits, convulsions; to fling fiercely; to chafe, to behave nervously (of a horse); to rough-house; feeling of weariness (from physical labor)’ > Written Mongolian *aysur-* ‘to storm, to fly into a rage, to be violent or furious; to be fiery’, *aysum* ‘(n.) fury, rage, madness; (adj.) furious, fiery, violent, tempestuous, spirited’, *aysum mori* ‘fiery or spirited horse’, *aysumna-* ‘to rage, to storm, to behave violently; to bluster, to be boisterous; to debauch’; Khalkha *agsam* ‘(n.) fury, rage; (adj.) furious, raging; fiery, spirited’, *agsamnax-* ‘to rage (of a drunken person); to be furious; to dash ahead (of a horse)’, *agsan* ‘furious, raging (of a drunken person)’, *agsan mori* ‘fiery, mettlesome horse’, *agsčix* ‘to be fiery all the time (of a horse); to continually rage’; Buriat *agšan* ‘frolicsome, prankish’, *agsam* ‘rampage, rage, raging’; Kalmyk *agsra-* ‘to chafe, to behave nervously (of a horse); to rough-house’, *agsag* ‘wild’; Ordos *agsur-* ‘to fling fiercely’, *agsum* ‘wild, raging’.
- c) Proto-Turkic **agsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp; lame’ > Karakhanide Turkic *axsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’, *aqsaq*, *aysay* ‘lame’, *aχsun*, *axsum* ‘rampage, rage, raging’; Turkish *aksa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Azerbaijani *axsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Turkmenian *agsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Uzbek *oqsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Tatar *aqsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Bashkir *aqha-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Kirghiz *aqsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Kazakh *aqsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Karachay-Balkar *aqsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Kara-Kalpak *aqsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Kumyk *aqsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Noghay *aqsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Sary-Uyghur *axsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Khakas *axsa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Tuva *asqa-* ‘to hobble, to limp’; Yakut *axsim* ‘lame’.
- d) Proto-Japanese **änkà-k-* ‘to paw (the air); to struggle, to strive’ > Old Japanese *agak-* > Middle Japanese *àgàk-* > Tokyo *agák-*; Kyoto *ágák-*; Kagoshima *àgàk-*.

Starostin—Dybo—Mudrak note that the Turkic forms may be loans from Mongolian and that both the Turkic and Mongolian branches have derivatives meaning ‘rampage, rage, raging’.

As an aside, it appears to me that it is possible to improve upon the meanings assigned to the proto-forms reconstructed by Starostin—Dybo—Mudrak. For Proto-Altaic **èk’á*, I propose the meanings ‘to move quickly, to rage’; for Proto-Tungus **ekte-*, ‘to make rapid movements’; and for Proto-Mongolian **(h)agsa-*, ‘to move quickly, to rage; to be furious, raging, violent, spirited, fiery, wild’. These changes take into consideration the derivatives meaning ‘rampage, rage, raging’. Though cited separately by Starostin—Dybo—Mudrak, these forms are key to determining the original semantics, and, consequently, they have been fully incorporated into the etymologies given above.

In his recent book, Anthony (2007:196—197) describes the behavior of wild horses as follows:

Wildlife biologists have observed the behavior of feral horse bands in several places around the world, notably at Aksania Nova, Ukraine, on the barrier islands of Maryland and Virginia (the horses described in children’s classic *Misty of Chincoteague*), and in northwestern Nevada. The standard feral horse band consists of a stallion with a harem of two to seven mares and their immature offspring. Adolescents leave the band at about two years of age. Stallion-and-harem bands occupy a home range, and stallions fight one another, fiercely, for control of mares and territory. After the young males are expelled they form loose associations called “bachelor bands,” which lurk at the edges of the home range of an established stallion. Most bachelors are unable to challenge mature stallions or keep mares successfully until they are more than five years old. Within established bands, the mares are arranged in a social hierarchy led by the lead mare,

who chooses where the band will go during most of the day and leads it in flight if there is a threat, while the stallion guards the flanks or the rear. Mares are therefore instinctively disposed to accept the dominance of others, whether dominant mares, stallions — or humans. Stallions are headstrong and violent, and are instinctively disposed to challenge authority by biting or kicking. A relatively docile and controllable mare could be found at the bottom of the pecking order in many wild horse bands, but a relatively docile and controllable stallion was an unusual individual — and one that had little hope of reproducing in the wild. Horse domestication might have depended on a lucky coincidence: the appearance of a relatively manageable and docile male and a place where humans could use him as the breeder of a domesticated bloodline. From the horse's perspective, humans were the only way he could get a girl. From the human perspective, he was the only sire they wanted.

The behavior of wild horses described by Anthony could not have been lost on the humans who encountered them on the Eurasian steppes. This behavior is clearly indicated in the Altaic terms cited above, as in Written Mongolian *aysur-* 'to storm, to fly into a rage, to be violent or furious; to be fiery', *aysum* '(n.) fury, rage, madness; (adj.) furious, fiery, violent, tempestuous, spirited', *aysum mori* 'fiery or spirited horse' or Khalkha *agsčix* 'to be fiery all the time (of a horse); to continually rage'.

Let us now propose that Proto-Altaic **èk'á* 'to move quickly, to rage' is to be compared with the Proto-Indo-European word for 'horse', **ek-u-s*, **ekyo-s*. Thus, by bringing the Altaic material into consideration, the original meaning of the Proto-Indo-European word for 'horse' becomes clear. It did not mean 'the swift one' but, rather, 'the spirited, violent, fiery, or wild one'. This could not have been seen on the basis of the Indo-European evidence alone. Both the Proto-Altaic and the Proto-Indo-European forms are to be derived from a Proto-Nostratic verbal root **?ek^h-* 'to move quickly, to rage; to be furious, raging, violent, spirited, fiery, wild' (noun = **?ek^h-a* 'rapid or violent movement, fury, rage').

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